



A Cross-National Comparison of the Internal Effects of Participation in Voluntary Organizations

Howard, M. and Gilbert, L. (2008). A Cross-National Comparison of the Internal Effects of Participation in Voluntary Organizations. *Political Studies*, 56(1), pp.12-32.

Abstract

On average, those persons with greater levels of involvement in voluntary organizations also engage in more political acts, have higher life satisfaction and are by and large more trusting of others than those who do not.

Theoretical groundings

The article is based on the Tocquevillian argument, which emphasises the ‘importance of face-to-face interaction in civic associations as the bedrock of American democracy. Without active participation in organizations,’ Tocqueville believed that extreme individualism and equality would sever the ties that bind people together to work for the common good.’

It is also assumed that those who participate in voluntary organisations are more likely to participate in politics, because ‘participation creates essential networks and opportunities for mobilization.’ Verba et al (1995). The concept of social connection of volunteering reduces the motivational and information ‘costs’ of volunteering. Although other studies have not found such a link but point to the sense of ‘identification and commitment to a cause,’ especially as ‘face to face’ interaction is not as important as it used to be given new forms of technology.

The studies

The analysis is based on two related studies – the European Social Survey (ESS) and the US ‘Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy’ (CID) survey, which incorporates detailed measures about respondents’ involvement in voluntary associations across nineteen European countries and in the United States. Overall, the results provided ‘general support for the Tocquevillian argument.’ On average, those persons with greater levels of involvement in voluntary organizations ‘also engage in more political acts, have higher life satisfaction and are (for the most part) more trusting than those who do not, even when controlling for important demographic factors.’

Findings

This analysis produced two especially noteworthy findings. From a cross-national perspective, it was found that all forms of involvement in organizations other than trade unions are significantly lower in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe and the US. In terms of the different types of involvement, most organizations have higher levels of membership than of participation, voluntary work or donating money, although with some interesting exceptions. They believe that previous studies which just focussed on membership is insufficient and this supports this argument.

The expectation is that the greater people's involvement in voluntary associations, the higher will be their levels of political action, life satisfaction and interpersonal trust. The results provide some support for these arguments. For example, political action almost more than tripled from the inactive to the super-active category in each country group. There is also a modest increase in life satisfaction. However, previous empirical studies have shown that demographic factors (especially socio-economic status, measured by income and education variables) are important predictors of political and civic activity.' However, there will be something of an endogenous relationship between participation and the variables studied. For example, it could be that happier and more trusting people are more likely to actively participate in voluntary organisations and thus, higher levels of trust and life satisfaction are not necessarily products of such participation.

The results from the ESS and CID surveys provide support for theories of civil society that stress active participation and its resultant effect on individuals. 'These findings lend support to the arguments of those who bemoan the rise of 'checkbox membership' as an alternative to face-to-face interaction within organizations.' However, they suggest that while sending a check may be better than no involvement at all, there is no substitute for actual participation.

Overall

On the whole, the study supports the Tocquevillian argument that 'increasing levels of involvement in voluntary organizations are associated with significantly higher levels of political action and life satisfaction and to a lesser extent, generalised trust, in all three sets of countries, and generalized trust in Western and Eastern Europe.' The one notable exception involves the 'weak relationship' between the index and generalised trust in the US.' However, there was not a strong link between the frequency of participation and life satisfaction.